

REV. HECTOR SCERRI

THE ECUMENICAL COMMITMENT OF POPE FRANCIS

Abstract. The Ecumenical Movement was born outside the Roman Catholic Church, just over a century ago. The impetus of this Movement officially came in touch with the Catholic Church during the relatively short, yet eventful Pontificate, of Pope John XXIII. The incipit of each of the five Pontificates since then has been analysed for the ecumenical credentials of each of the men who was elected Bishop of Rome. On the 13th March 2013, we witnessed the election of Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio as the new Pope. In the few months which have passed since the election of Pope Francis, we have been able to focus our attention upon the few, yet highly important, ecumenical pronouncements he has made.

Key words: ecumenism, pope Francis, commitment, pontificate.

1. FROM THE EARLIEST STIRRINGS IN BERGOGLIO

It is both relevant and revealing to give a brief glance at Bergoglio's thoughts on ecumenism prior to his election. In what has probably been the text which has been most widely translated, we encounter Bergoglio's remarks while in dialogue with the Argentine Rabbi Abraham Skorka. The many conversations between the two friends were published, in 2010, under the name *Sobre el cielo y la tierra*. The English translation bears the title *On Heaven and Earth*, with the subtitle *Pope Francis on Faith, Family and the Church in the 21st Century*. It is interesting to note what might have been the first experience of *other Christians* by the very young Jorge Mario Bergoglio. He narrates that in the context of a certain 'puritan' tradition affecting certain members of his immediate family,

Rev. Dr. HECTOR SCERRI—a Senior Lecturer and the Head of the Department of Fundamental and Dogmatic Theology of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Malta; address for correspondence: University of Malta, Msida MSD 2080, Malta; e-mail: hector.scerri@um.edu.mt

...they believed all Protestants were going to hell; but I remember one time I was with my grandmother, a great woman, and two women from the Salvation Army had just passed by. I was about five or six years old, and I asked her if they were nuns, because they were wearing that little hat that they used to wear. She responded to me: 'No, they are Protestants, but they are good'. That was the wisdom of the true religion. They were good women who did good things.¹

That little seed, pregnant with practical wisdom and deep insight, left an enormous impression on the young boy who would later become a priest, and much later, the Bishop of Rome. In the book's fourth chapter which brings together the conversation between Bergoglio and Skorka on the theme of religions, the future Pope Francis stated:

God makes himself felt in the heart of each person. He also respects the culture of all people. [...] Christians believe, ultimately, that [God] manifested himself to us and gave himself to us through Jesus Christ. Moreover, throughout history, there have existed circumstances that created schisms and constructed diverse communities that have different ways of living Christianity, like the Reformation. We lived through a thirty year war and it shaped different faiths. It is very hard to accept and it was a disgraceful time, but that is the reality. God is patient, he waits, and God does not kill. It is man that wants to do so, on God's behalf. To kill in the name of God is blasphemy.²

Here, while on the one hand Bergoglio referred to the genesis of diverse Christian Traditions, on the other he touched upon the sore point of violence, murder and war in the name of religion. He affirms that various communities devised 'different ways of living Christianity' which, at times, led to terrible confrontations. Thankfully, these episodes belong to bygone eras. The last fifty years, in particular, have seen encouraging signs and gestures whereby Christians belonging to different Churches and ecclesial communities have met each other, discussed theological points, prayed together and engaged themselves in common initiatives in favour of the marginalised and the suffering. The creation, more than fifty years ago, of a specialised dicastery of the Roman Curia to enhance and promote ecumenical relations has been a very positive step in the right direction. Following the conciliar decree on ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio* (1964), the pronouncements on the theme have been numerous: documents, messages and speeches.

¹ Jorge Mario Bergoglio and Abraham Skorka, *On Heaven and Earth. Pope Francis on Faith, Family and the Church in the 21st Century* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2013), 73. See John Borelli, "John and Francis: two of a kind," *The Tablet*, 15 June 2013, 5.

² *Ibid.*, 19.

The present Pontificate which is still in its early stages naturally builds upon the efforts of the previous Popes. This is true even with regard to the ecumenical commitment of the Catholic Church. Our aim, in this paper, is to analyse the main ecumenical gestures of Pope Francis. In the months of March, May and June 2013, four important ecumenical encounters have featured highly among the activities of the new Pope. These are the meeting with the Delegations from other Churches and ecclesial communities on 20th March 2013, namely, the day following the official inauguration of the pastoral mission of Pope Francis. The second event, also of great importance, is the encounter between Pope Francis and the Head of the Coptic Orthodox Church, Pope Tawadros II, on 10th May 2013. On 14th June, Pope Francis received the Archbishop of Canterbury, His Grace Justin Welby. The fourth event, on 28th June 2013, consisted in the meeting between Pope Francis and the delegation sent by the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople on the occasion of the solemn feast of St Peter and St Paul. These four major events took place within the remarkable span of exactly one hundred days—from 20th March to 28th June 2013.

2. THE FIRST MAJOR ECUMENICAL EVENT OF THE NEW PONTIFICATE

The first ecumenically significant meeting took place on 20th March 2013 in the Clementine Hall, in the Vatican. Following the words expressed by the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomaios I, Pope Francis addressed the representatives of thirty-three Churches and Ecclesial Communities, as well as those from the different religions. The words of Pope Francis are of particular significance, because he underlines his personal ecumenical commitment which is that of the Roman Catholic Church. At this meeting, one notes, among others, the presence of the following Christian leaders: *Catholicos* Karekin II of the Armenians, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk from the Patriarchate of Moscow, the Anglican Archbishop John Sentamu, the President of the World Lutheran Federation Munib Younan, and the President of the Communion of Reformed Churches Jerry Pillay.

It is also to be noted that this was the first time that an Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople ever attended the inauguration of the pastoral mission of the Bishop of Rome, let alone since the Orthodox schism of 1054. Mark Woodruff, the vice-chairman of the Society of St John Chrysostom which promotes Catholic-Orthodox relations in Great Britain, wrote that “Po-

pe Francis' reference to himself as the 'Bishop of Rome' was music to the ears of Orthodox leaders for whom the question of papal primacy has long been a problem for reunion. Their attendance at the new Pope's inaugural Mass was a sign of their hopes for closer communion."³ Woodruff reports the statement made by the Patriarchate of Constantinople explaining the personal decision taken by Bartholomaios to attend the inauguration Mass—"the need for a profoundly bold step ... that could have lasting significance."⁴ Woodruff, citing the ecumenically eloquent words on the website of the Patriarchate, and commenting on the encounter in Rome on 20th March, tells us that

'after such a long division ... authentic reunion will require courage, leadership and humility. Given Pope Francis' well-documented work for social justice and his insistence that globalisation is detrimental to the poor ... the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic traditions have a renewed opportunity to work collectively on issues of mutual concern ... But such work requires a first step and it would appear as though Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew is willing to take such a step'. In one of those seemingly informal but resonant gestures that we are beginning to expect from Francis, the response was immediate and commensurate. The successor of Peter greeted the successor of the other Galilean fisherman as 'my brother Andrew'.⁵

Pope Francis thanked those at the Audience for their spiritual presence on the previous day. He said:

Yesterday morning, during Holy Mass, through you I felt the spiritual presence of the communities which you represent. In this expression of faith, it seemed that we were experiencing all the more urgently the prayer for unity between believers in Christ and at the same time seeing prefigured in some way its full realisation, which depends on God's plan and our own faithful cooperation.⁶

Pope Francis then contextualised the beginning of his ministry as Bishop of Rome by referring to the Year of Faith which had been proposed and inaugurated by his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI. He explained how this initiative provides a stimulus to the common journey which all Christians

³ Mark Woodruff, "My brother Andrew," *The Tablet*, 30 March 2013, 8. Cfr Daniela Sala, "Francesco e la stagione ecumenical. Germogli," *Il Regno* 58/1141, 15 March 2013, 122; Gianfranco Brunelli, "Il Pastore. Primi passi del nuovo Papa," *Il Regno* 58/1141, 15 March 2013, 123.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.* See Borelli, "John and Francis," 4.

⁶ Pope Francis, Address during the Audience with Representatives of the Churches and Ecclesial Communities and of the different Religions (20 March 2013), *L'Osservatore Romano*, English ed., 27 March 2013, 7.

have embarked upon, namely that of experiencing Jesus Christ who continues to transform the faithful. He stated:

I begin my apostolic ministry during this year which my venerable predecessor Benedict XVI, with truly inspired intuition, proclaimed for the Catholic Church as a *Year of Faith*. With this initiative, which I wish to continue and which I trust will prove a stimulus for our common journey of faith, he wanted to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the beginning of the Second Vatican Council by proposing a sort of pilgrimage towards what all Christians consider essential: the personal, transforming encounter with Jesus Christ...⁷

It is worth highlighting certain expressions used by Pope Francis, expressions which he had not rehearsed beforehand, but which are derived from his firm conviction regarding the journey of faith—a journey which is common to all Christians. This journey has its difficulties and challenges; yet, it remains a forward-oriented journey.

Brother John of Taizé affirms that “the image of the journey ... has one great advantage: its dynamic, open-ended character. In addition to corresponding well to the mentality of our time, it enables us to grasp the progressive quality of God’s self-revelation, and the dimension of risk, adventure, which is so fundamental to the life of faith”⁸. We all agree that there are many different types of journey; yet in the context of this paper, and in the light of the words of Pope Francis on 20th March 2013, we can focus on the ecumenical journey which is inspired by embracing the ecumenical ideal as one aspect of putting one’s faith into practice, as we Christians—from different Churches and ecclesial communities—continue our quest for God.

The British theologian Nicholas Lash writes: “Many roads meet at places of pilgrimage. People come from different directions, with different agendas, different dreams, different histories. [...] Like all holy places, places of pilgrimage are microcosmic. What is to be found there is not less than everything: *ourselves, our heart’s rest, homecoming in God*”⁹. Well, journeys of all kinds—whether for profane reasons, whether for the sake of curiosity, whether for interior or spiritual reasons—entail a passage, an exodus, a movement from a familiar place to, perhaps, an unfamiliar one; journeys entail leaving the safety and comfort of one’s home and embarking on a path

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Brother John of Taizé, *The Pilgrim God. A Biblical Journey* (Portland, Oregon: Pastoral Press, 1985), 3-4.

⁹ Nicholas Lash, *Theology for Pilgrims* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2008), 167.

which may be tortuous, full of perils and uncertain¹⁰. The ecumenical journey is well-described by these categories.

In the same speech, Pope Francis addressed the issue of evolving ecumenical relations. Using fraternal and amicable terms, he told Patriarch Bartholomew and the various ecumenical delegations present: “Along with you, I cannot forget all that the Council meant for the progress of ecumenism.”¹¹ He then went on to quote the very words of Pope John XXIII in the landmark address at the inauguration of the Second Vatican Council: “The Catholic Church considers it her duty to work actively for the fulfilment of the great mystery of that unity for which Jesus Christ prayed so earnestly to his heavenly Father on the eve of his great sacrifice...”¹² Pope Francis elaborated upon those prophetic words uttered in 1962 by reiterating Christ’s desire for unity among his disciples. He stated:

Yes, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, let us all feel closely united to the prayer of our Saviour at the Last Supper, to his appeal: *ut unum sint*. Let us ask the Father of mercies to enable us to live fully the faith graciously bestowed upon us on the day of our Baptism and to bear witness to it freely, joyfully and courageously. This will be the best service we can offer to the cause of Christian unity, a service of hope for a world still torn by divisions, conflicts and rivalries. The more we are faithful to his will, in our thoughts, words and actions, the more we will progress, really and substantially, towards unity.¹³

It is useful to analyse linguistically the words used by the Bishop of Rome, particularly the adverbs he used to describe the way we bear witness together as Christians: *freely, joyfully, courageously*. Furthermore, the adverbs used by Pope Francis in order to describe the ecumenical journey embarked upon by Christians, are also worth noting: *really, substantially*. The latter terms are very incisive, besides the fact that within the Catholic Tradition, these adverbs are used to describe very important and central truths of the faith. Again, what has been said thus far denotes the high ecumenical commitment of Pope Francis. This was made even more clear in the same speech, when he affirmed: “For my part, I wish to assure you that, in continuity with my predecessors, it is my firm intention to pursue the path of

¹⁰ Cfr Hector Scerri, “Wayfaring and Seafaring: A Theological Reading of the ‘Mediterranean Journey’,” *The Person and the Challenges* 1 (2011): 73.

¹¹ Pope Francis, Address during Audience with Representatives of the Churches and Ecclesial Communities and of the different Religions, *ibid*.

¹² *Ibid*.

¹³ *Ibid*.

ecumenical dialogue, and I thank the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity for the help that it continues to provide, in my name, in the service of this most noble cause.”¹⁴ One is struck not only by the clearly worded expression of the intentions of Pope Francis, but also by his plea for prayers by other Christians: “... and I beg of you the charity of a special prayer for me, that I may be a pastor according to the heart of Christ.”¹⁵ This is, in my opinion, a very moving affirmation by the Head of the Catholic Church asking for the intercessory prayers made by other Christians on his behalf. Commenting on the first two weeks of the new Pontificate with regard to Catholic-Orthodox relations, Mark Woodruff holds that

Pope Francis’ intention to trust and work with the ‘local Church’ resonates with many Orthodox. They have been looking for signs that the collegiality set forth at Vatican II will turn into reality. They have noted how he has called himself not supreme pontiff or Pope, but Bishop of Rome. They will be looking to see how the Primate of the Church ‘presiding in love’ at Rome, will treat the Eastern Catholic Churches: as subsets of the global Roman Catholic organisation, or as honoured Churches, firmly rooted in their local homeland... It will reveal how the new Pope envisages the restoration of communion between Catholics and Orthodox, since West and East must rely on each other for the future. The Orthodox will be hoping that indeed Pope Francis, Brother Peter to Brother Andrew, ‘knows our Church’.¹⁶

3. THE ENCOUNTER WITH POPE TAWADROS II OF THE COPTIC ORTHODOX CHURCH

The second ecumenical event of major importance in the first months of the Pontificate of the new Bishop of Rome was the historic encounter with the Coptic Orthodox Patriarch of Alexandria, Pope Tawadros II, on 10th May 2013. The speech by Pope Francis is indeed memorable on account of the many weighty expressions he made which throw a precious light on the appreciation of the See of Rome for the “inestimable heritage of martyrs, theologians, holy monks and faithful disciples of Christ who have borne witness to the Gospel from generation to generation, often in situations of

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Woodruff, “My brother Andrew,” 9.

great adversity.”¹⁷ The fortieth anniversary of the memorable meeting between their two predecessors was recalled. In fact, on 10th May 1973, Pope Paul VI met Pope Shenouda III, an encounter which united them “in an embrace of peace and fraternity after centuries of mutual distance.” In February 2000, in the context of one of his pilgrimages during the Great Jubilee—the pilgrimage to Sinai, in Egypt—Blessed John Paul II, too, met Pope Shenouda III.

In the light of the Joint Declaration between the two Churches in 1973, “a milestone on the ecumenical journey” had been reached, this leading to the institution of a Joint Commission of theological dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Coptic Orthodox Church.”¹⁸ The Joint Declaration of Paul VI and Shenouda III highlights the many aspects which are common to both Churches. Pope Francis emphasised that in the Declaration made by their predecessors,

our Churches acknowledged that, in line with the apostolic traditions, they profess one faith in the One Triune God and the divinity of the only-begotten Son of God ... perfect with respect to his divinity, perfect man with respect to his humanity. They acknowledged that divine life is given to us and nourished through the seven sacraments and they recognised a mutual bond in their common devotion to the Mother of God.¹⁹

In his speech, Pope Francis praised the efforts of the Joint Commission and noted that its fruit has enhanced dialogue with other Oriental Orthodox Churches.

Although the question of baptism remains quite a thorny issue in the relationship of Catholics to several Orthodox Churches, including the Coptic Orthodox, especially in the context of mixed marriages, Pope Francis, on a positive and optimistic tone, underlined the fact that Christians from both Churches are indeed “united by one Baptism, of which our common prayer is a special expression that looks forward to the day when, in fulfilment of the Lord’s desire, we will be able to drink together from the one cup.”²⁰

A poignant theme which Pope Francis addressed in his address was his gratitude to the Head of the Orthodox Church of Egypt for the care shown by

¹⁷ Pope Francis, Address to Pope Tawadros II (10 May 2013), *L’Osservatore Romano*, English ed., 15 May 2013, 3. Cfr *The Tablet*, 18 May 2013, 26.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

the latter with regard to the Catholic Coptic Christians. In a country where Islamic fundamentalism is on the rise, the mutual support shown by Christians is an encouraging fact. This has led to the establishment of a National Council of Christian Churches in Egypt. Pope Francis affirmed that this initiative “represents an important sign of the will of all believers in Christ to develop relations in daily life that are increasingly fraternal and to put themselves at the service of the whole of Egyptian society of which they form an integral part.”²¹ The Bishop of Rome expressed his appreciation at the efforts undertaken by the Patriarch by stating:

Let me assure Your Holiness that your efforts to build communion among believers in Christ, and your lively interest in the future of your country and the role of the Christian communities within Egyptian society find a deep echo in the heart of the Successor of Peter and of the entire Catholic community.²²

Another theme of great significance underlined by Pope Francis in his meeting on 10th May was that regarding the ecumenism of suffering. It is true that the ecumenical journey has many facets, notably theological dialogue, humanitarian cooperation and *diakonia*, and that of human friendships at the grassroots. Yet, the common suffering experienced by separated brethren is surely conducive to Christian unity. In fact, well aware of the hardships to which Christians in Egypt are often subject, the Bishop of Rome affirmed:

‘If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together’. This is a law of Christian life, and in this sense we can say that there is also an ecumenism of suffering: just as the blood of the martyrs was a seed of strength and fertility for the Church, so too the sharing of daily sufferings can become an effective instrument of unity.²³

4. MEETING THE ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY

It is indeed striking how the first months of the pontificate of Pope Francis have been marked with events of great ecumenical significance. In fact, on 14th June 2013, Pope Francis received His Grace Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Primate of the Anglican Communion. In

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

response to the address made by Welby who said how much he felt himself at home, the Bishop of Rome recalled the kind words of Pope Paul VI, in 1966, to the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Archbishop Michael Ramsey when the latter visited Rome. Pope Francis expressed his heartfelt gratitude to Archbishop Welby because during the latter's installation in Canterbury Cathedral in March—indeed during the very first days after the election of Francis—the congregation was led to make a prayer for the new Bishop of Rome. It is therefore not surprising that in his speech, Pope Francis told Archbishop Welby: “Since we began our respective ministries within days of each other, I think we will always have a particular reason to support one another in prayer.”²⁴

The Holy Father referred to the long history of painful and complex relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England. He then expressed his appreciation of the great strides made in the last fifty years or so, a time which has

been marked by a journey of rapprochement and fraternity, and for this [he stated] we give heartfelt thanks to God. This journey has been brought about both via theological dialogue, through the work of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, and via the growth of cordial relations at every level through shared daily lives in a spirit of profound mutual respect and sincere cooperation.²⁵

It was, in my opinion, very thoughtful of Pope Francis to refer to the sincere efforts made by members of the Anglican Communion to understand the motivation behind Pope Benedict XVI's provision, through *Anglicanorum Coetibus*, of a canonical structure which responded to the wishes of groups of Anglicans who expressed their desire to be received collectively into the Catholic Church. Echoing the sentiments of his predecessor, Francis affirmed, in his speech to Welby: “I am sure this will enable the spiritual, liturgical and pastoral traditions that form the Anglican patrimony to be better known and appreciated in the Catholic world.”²⁶ In other words, Pope

²⁴ Pope Francis, Address to His Grace Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury (14 June 2013), *L'Osservatore Romano*, English ed., 19 June 2013, 16.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid. In this context, it is worth noting that the Anglican Bishop of Argentina, Gregory Venables, then Primate of the Province of the Southern Cone, said that at the time of the publication of *Anglicanorum Coetibus*, in 2009, Cardinal Bergoglio had expressed his reservations about the new provision, saying that it was not “entirely necessary.” Venables is reported to have said: “One morning [Cardinal Bergoglio] invited me to breakfast and said clearly that the

Francis was stating that is not only a question of accommodating Anglicans who wished to be received into the Catholic Church while retaining a large part of their Tradition, but also of Roman Catholics appreciating the wealth of the Anglican Tradition, particularly its rich spiritual heritage as expressed in its liturgical prayers, its hymns and the writings of its great spiritual masters.

In his address, Pope Francis dwelt on the importance of working together to improve ecumenical relations. His commitment to ecumenism is evident in his words to the Archbishop of Canterbury: “Today’s meeting, my dear brother, is an opportunity to remind ourselves that the search for unity among Christians is prompted not by practical considerations, but by the will of the Lord Jesus Christ himself, who made us his brothers and sisters, children of the One Father.”²⁷

The Bishop of Rome underlined the importance of prayer in the quest for Christian unity. The theme of spiritual ecumenism was the focus of the Plenary Meeting of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in 2003. As the former President of the Council, Cardinal Walter Kasper stated, “prayer for unity is the royal door of ecumenism: it leads Christians to look at the kingdom of God and the unity of the Church in a fresh way... Spiritual ecumenism also requires a ‘change of heart and holiness of life’, arising from Jesus’ call to conversion.”²⁸ In his important address in June, Pope Francis reiterated the momentum generated by prayer in the promotion of Christian unity. He stated that “prayer gives a fresh impulse to our daily efforts to grow towards unity, which are concretely expressed in our cooperation in various areas of daily life.”²⁹

ordinariate was not at all needed and that the Church needs us, referring to the Anglicans ... He was just saying quite honestly ‘we want you to be you’ ... it was him saying to me as an Anglican friend: ‘I personally appreciate Anglicans as you are, I see no need for you to stop being Anglicans ... That’s a personal opinion and now he’s in a completely different place ... [As Pope] he would be generous to those that are in the ordinariate and generous to those that aren’t in it. He didn’t imply that it was either temporary or an error—he just said that he liked us being Anglicans as we were.’ Furthermore, Venables stated that Bergoglio would prove to be “an ecumenical and pastoral Pope, as he had been during his time in Argentina.” Cfr Liz Todd, “Bergoglio raised doubts about need for ordinariate,” *The Tablet*, 23 March 2013, 38; Editorial, “Francis looks to the future,” *The Tablet*, 22 June 2013, 2.

²⁷ Pope Francis, Address to His Grace Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury (14 June 2013), *L’Osservatore Romano*, English ed. , 19 June 2013, 16.

²⁸ Walter Kasper, *A Handbook of Spiritual Ecumenism* (New York: New City Press, 2007), 11.

²⁹ Pope Francis, Address to His Grace Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury (14 June 2013), *L’Osservatore Romano*, English ed. , 19 June 2013, 16.

He then elaborated upon the various possible ways of cooperation among Christians belonging to different Traditions in their joint promotion of basic Christian values, such as the sanctity of life, the centrality of the family to society, the achievement of social justice which is at the service of the common good, respect for the marginalised and the commitment in favour of reconciliation on all levels.³⁰ In the conclusion of his address, Pope Francis affirmed that

the unity we so earnestly long for is a gift that comes from above and ... is rooted in our communion of love with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit... My dear brother, let us travel the path towards unity, fraternally united in charity, and with Jesus Christ, our elder Brother, as our constant point of reference.³¹

This was, in my opinion, a very fitting conclusion to an encouraging speech which is the latest in a long series of speeches exchanged between successive Bishops of Rome and Archbishops of Canterbury.

5. POPE FRANCIS WELCOMES AN IMPORTANT DELEGATION FROM THE ECUMENICAL PATRIARCHATE OF CONSTANTINOPLE

The fourth text which is being analysed in this paper is the speech delivered by Pope Francis on 28th June 2013 to the Delegation from the Patriarch of Constantinople on the occasion of the celebration of the feast of St Peter and St Paul. The praiseworthy custom, since 1969, of an exchange of delegations between the two Churches, is a source of great joy, the Holy Father confessed. He underlined the importance of such a personal encounter which bears witness to “the profound bond uniting the Church of Constantinople to the Church of Rome in faith, hope and charity.”³² Recalling the presence of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomaios I himself at the solemn inauguration of his mission as Bishop of Rome, Pope Francis expressed once again the extraordinary character of such a profound and “exquisite gesture”³³ on the part of the Patriarch and the Church of Constantinople.

³⁰ Cfr *ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.* Cfr Christopher Lamb, “Welby and Francis to review relations between Churches,” *The Tablet*, 15 June 2013, 30.

³² Pope Francis, Address to the Delegation of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (28 June 2013), *L'Osservatore Romano*, English ed., 3 July 2013, 5.

³³ *Ibid.*

Responding to Metropolitan Ioannis of Pergamon, the head of the Delegation who said that the quest for Christian unity “is not a luxury, but an imperative”, Pope Francis underlined the urgency of this common task. He dwelt upon the responsibility to bear a common witness, especially when faced with so many tragic situations in today’s world:

In our world, which hungers and thirsts for truth, love, hope, peace and unity, our witness demands that we should at last be able to proclaim with one voice the good news of the Gospel and to celebrate together the Divine Mysteries of new life in Christ! We are well aware that unity is primarily a gift from God for which we must pray without ceasing, but we all have the task of preparing the conditions, cultivating the ground of our hearts, so that this great grace may be received.³⁴

As we have seen above, on the occasion of such high level ecumenical encounters, the Holy Father has always expressed his appreciation for the indefatigable work done by the different Joint Commissions which bring together Catholic representatives and the representatives of other Churches and ecclesial communities. During his encounter with the Greek Orthodox Delegation, Pope Francis referred to the precious contribution to the cause of Christian unity made by the Mixed International Commission for Theological Dialogue, co-chaired by Metropolitan Ioannis and by Cardinal Kurt Koch, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. While expressing satisfaction at the work done in past decades, the Bishop of Rome was realistic in saying there are areas which still divide the two Churches, and which we should not conceal. He said that the Mixed Commission

has already produced many common texts and is now studying the delicate theme of the theological and ecclesiological relationship between primacy and synodality in the Church’s life. It is significant that today we are able to reflect together on these areas in truth and love, beginning from what we have in common, yet without concealing what still divides us.³⁵

Pope Francis continued to show his down-to-earth sense of realism by stating that the strenuous efforts of the Mixed Commission do not consist in abstract discussions, but in a serious study of the respective aspects of the theology which characterises the respective Traditions. This is an important principle which naturally applies to dialogue with other Churches and

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

ecclesial communities. While addressing the Orthodox Delegation from Constantinople, the Bishop of Rome affirmed in very clear terms, also providing a practical concrete example, that theological dialogue is

no mere theoretical exercise: it demands in-depth knowledge of one another's traditions in order to understand them and sometimes also to learn from them. I am speaking for example of the Catholic Church's reflection on the meaning of episcopal collegiality and the tradition of synodality, so characteristic of the Orthodox Churches.³⁶

Pope Francis then went on to explain what true ecumenical dialogue consists in, and distinguishes it from what may turn out to be superficial and mediocre. He insisted that dialogue is not about finding a compromise, but rather delving deeper into the matter. In my opinion, it is encouraging to note that the ecumenical commitment of Pope Francis provides us with clear principles and a sure path. In his speech on 28th June, he stated:

I find it reassuring to know that Catholics and Orthodox share a notion of dialogue that is not about seeking a theological lowest common denominator on which to reach a compromise, but is rather about deepening our grasp of the sole truth that Christ has given to his Church, a truth that we never cease to understand better, as we follow the Holy Spirit's promptings. Hence, we must not be afraid of encounter and true dialogue. This does not lead us away from the truth; rather, through an exchange of gifts, it leads us, under the guidance of the Spirit of Truth, towards the whole Truth (cfr *Jn* 16:13).³⁷

As in the other speeches which have been analysed above, Pope Francis, also on this occasion, underlined the common Christian duty and responsibility of caring for the poor, the suffering and those who are unjustly persecuted on account of their faith in Christ. Again, very poignantly, Francis asked the Orthodox brethren he was receiving to pray for him in the exercise of his mission.³⁸

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

6. CONCLUSION AND UPDATE

In an interview with Gerard Mannion, prior to the conclave which elected Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, we can get a glimpse of what the ecclesio-
logist and professor of theology at the University of San Diego, California
thought about the priorities a future Pope should have. Among other things,
Mannion said that “in the twenty-first century, the Church cries out for a spi-
ritual leader who will build bridges—across the Church, with other Chur-
ches, between Christianity and other faiths, between the Church and the
wider global community.”³⁹

After the text of this paper was finalized with the scope of going early to
print, it has to be pointed out that Pope Francis received His Holiness Base-
lios Marthoma Paulose II, Catholicos of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian
Church on 5th September, while calling for a ‘culture of encounter’ which
overcomes the ‘culture of clashes’. Referring to the earliest missionary in
India, the Apostle St Thomas, Pope Francis affirmed that “the apostolic
fraternity which united the first disciples in their service of the Gospel,
today also unites our Churches, notwithstanding the many divisions that
have arisen in the sometimes sad course of history, divisions which, thanks
to God, we are endeavouring to overcome in obedience to the Lord’s will
and desire.”⁴⁰ Again, the Holy Father re-affirms his commitment—and that
of the Catholic Church—to overcome the hurdles which separate these
sister-Churches. Taking his cue from the profound confession of faith made
by Thomas when he met the Risen Christ, ‘My Lord and my God!’ (Jn
20:28), the Bishop of Rome stated that “it is precisely in this faith that we
meet each other; it is this faith that unites us, even if we cannot share the
Eucharistic table; and it is this faith which urges us to continue and intensify
the commitment to ecumenism, encounter and dialogue towards full com-
munion.”⁴¹ While remaining cognizant of the fact that we cannot share at the
same Eucharist, Pope Francis reiterates the commitment of the Catholic
Church to all forms of ecumenical dialogue. Referring to the important con-
tacts made between the two Churches during the Pontificate of John Paul II
and the institution of a mixed commission in the late 1980s, Francis under-

³⁹ *The Tablet*, 16 March 2013, 10.

⁴⁰ Pope Francis, Address to His Holiness Moran Baselios Marthoma Paulose II, Catholicos of
the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church (5 September 2013), *L’Osservatore Romano*, English ed.,
11 September 2013, 6.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

lined the benefits reaped in the wake of an agreement reached on the day of Pentecost 1990 regarding the sharing of resources: buildings, cemeteries, as well as mutual concessions in particular pastoral situations. In the conclusion of his speech, Pope Francis highlighted the importance of prayer in the cause of Christian unity. He told the Catholicos of the Syro-Malankara Church that as we intensify our prayer, it is the Holy Spirit who with “his light and his warmth can melt our coldness and guide our steps towards an even greater brotherhood.”⁴²

During the Wednesday General Audience of 25th September, Pope Francis—in the context of his catechesis on the Church—mentioned the wounds of division among Christians. He insisted upon the effort which goes to restoring communion. Addressing the faithful, he said: “It is we who create wounds! And if we look at the divisions that still exist among Christians, Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants... we are aware of the effort required to make this unity fully visible. God gives us unity, but we often have a lot of trouble putting it into practice. It is necessary to seek to build communion, to teach communion, to get the better of misunderstandings and divisions, starting with the family, with ecclesial reality, in ecumenical dialogue too.”⁴³ Here, in very direct and practical terms which are easy to understand, the Holy Father reminds us of our duty to overcome divisions through a commitment to communion and personal humility.

Another recent significant ecumenical encounter which took place on 27th September 2013 was that between Pope Francis and the Greek Orthodox Patriarch Youhanna X of Antioch and All the East. In an interview with Vatican Radio, the Patriarch expressed his appreciation of the Pope’s solicitude for the suffering people of Syria. Moreover, Patriarch Youhanna stated that in his private audience with the Holy Father, he spoke not only of the abduction of his brother, also a Bishop, and another Syrian bishop in April, but also of the continuing dialogue between the two Churches, and the progress made in this process. A particularly poignant moment which was beautifully captured on the media was when Pope Francis and Patriarch Youhanna, before bidding each other farewell, paused—with their hands united, their heads bowed together and their eyes closed—to pray for each other. Gestures are often more powerful than words.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Pope Francis, General Audience (25 September 2013), *L’Osservatore Romano*, English ed., 2 October 2013, 9.

We are thankful to God because this is what he has gifted us with in the person of Pope Francis. In the first months of his Pontificate, we have seen him building bridges with other Churches; we have listened to his addresses on ecumenism on several important occasions; he has admirably responded to the good will gestures extended to him by means of prophetic gestures and words which augur well for the future of ecumenical relations.

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EKUMENICZNE ZAANGAŻOWANIE PAPIEŻA FRANCISZKA

Streszczenie

Ruch ekumeniczny narodził się ponad sto lat temu poza Kościołem rzymskokatolickim. Do Kościoła katolickiego zaś oficjalnie wkroczył za czasów stosunkowo krótkiego, lecz pełnego wydarzeń pontyfikatu papieża Jana XXIII. Każdy z pięciu następnych pontyfikatów był już analizowany pod kątem stosunku do ekumenicznego mandatu kolejnych następców Biskupa Rzymu. W dniu 13 marca 2013 r. byliśmy świadkami wyboru kardynała Jorge Mario Bergoglio na nowego papieża. Autor artykułu skupił swoją uwagę na nielicznych, ale bardzo ważnych ekumenicznych wypowiedziach papieża Franciszka w ciągu kilku miesięcy, które upłynęły od jego wyboru.

Przełożył Stanisław Sarek

Słowa kluczowe: ekumenizm, papież Franciszek, zaangażowanie, pontyfikat.